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Playing It Straight

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"Unless we tell the truth and state the facts as we see them," Hubert Humphrey wrote in this journal in 1952, "we betray our liberal traditions and associate ourselves with the false bill of goods that some people have tried to sell the American people." That is a useful reminder as we ponder the fast-breaking story of CIA and its many once-secret efforts to fight communism abroad by conscripting, through subsidies, American "private" organizations.

Detail piles on top of detail. William C. Carr, executive secretary of the prestigious and well-heeled National Education Association, discloses that in 1958 he helped set up the Vernon Fund, through which CIA financed the World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession, of which Mr. Carr is secretary general. The American Newspaper Guild admits it took large amounts from organizations identified as CIA fronts for its overseas program. "I used to think the CIA was some horrible fascist conspiracy," a former "witting" (complicit) student leader said last week. "Then I discovered it was a little treasure-trove of liberalism, the one refuge for liberals during the McCarthy period." Mr. Dooley long ago put it differently: "A lie with a purpose is one of the worst kind and the most profitable."

Why did so many turn so willingly to CIA for help? Because, in the first place, it had the money. Also, it was audacious; it was concerned about foreign governments-to-be; it appreciated that anti-communism is not salable in most countries unless it is wrapped in a progressive package. CIA needed the American left, and the American left was flattered to be needed. Each served its own needs in serving the other's. Labor officials, intellectuals, churchmen and the like found the money and support for their pet projects at the CIA when they had been denied by more cautious private foundations. A case in point is the Independent Research Service, a student organization founded in the months before the Vienna Youth Festival of 1959. American students wanted to attend the festival, but not on the "official" delegation, considered to be pro-communist. Attempts were made to get private support for an anti-communist delegation, but foundations shied from any contact with the festival. Enter the CIA, which underwrote the Independent Research trip and began a long relationship with the organization and its directors.

That experience was repeated hundreds of times during the height of the cold war in the late forties and fifties. Smallish grants were made to three student projects of the National Council of Churches.